SOCIAL COHESION AND THE MANAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

AY 19/20 GL4102 TASKFORCE FINAL REPORT
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

RESEARCH QUESTION:

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN SINGAPORE TO BETTER MANAGE RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL COHESION?

1. Executive Summary [368 words]

This report examines Singapore's management of religious diversity and investigates how this can be enhanced to improve domestic social cohesion considering the rising global threat of religious extremism. It aims to draw attention to the link between religious diversity and social cohesion, delineate Singapore's successes and existing gaps in this area, and finally provide policy recommendations to better manage these gaps.

Through a SWOT analysis, we have identified six gaps regarding Singapore's management of religious diversity. Firstly, religious extremism has evolved to constitute an urgent threat for Singapore, manifesting in the form of rising Islamophobia and the threat of self-radicalisation. Secondly, religion as taught in the current Character Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum guards against outright religious intolerance while possibly dampening deeper discussions vital for cultivating deeper mutual religious appreciation. Thirdly, there remains a lack of "ground-up" and interfaith organizations that adopt an action-oriented approach to interreligious dialogue. In addition, interfaith dialogue in Singapore lacks deeper engagement and largely only involves religious leaders and interested followers, with out-of-bounds (OB) markers in place hindering candour conversations. The fifth gap talks about the lack of common spaces for social interaction after schooling years and a lack of youth involvement in interfaith dialogues. The final gap revolves around online religious tensions, driven by the rise of misinformation through social media.

Based on these identified gaps, we proposed solutions covering three broad categories - 1) education, 2) digital counter narratives and 3) fostering social capital. Education-based solutions include improving the CCE syllabus by - encouraging student autonomy confidence and participation; incorporating religious extremism into the CCE syllabus; and collaboration with experts to better equip teachers with the skills to facilitate discussions on complex topics. Digital counter-narrative centred solutions include - creating alternative sources for digital narratives online; and reaching beyond social media echo chambers. Thirdly, solutions that foster social capital include - improving current interreligious dialogues in Singapore; establishing an Interreligious Task Force; developing media advocacy capabilities of grassroots; and building community nodes that identify central community figures that could be tapped on to decentralise interreligious community building in everyday encounters. Global case studies have also been embedded in each of these proposed solutions, and we end the report by suggesting an implementation timeline for these solutions.